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ABSTRACT

After a brief discussion of the issues prompting concern with competency-based education (CBE) and an explanation of what it is and why it is so popular, this document goes on to discuss action Wisconsin and other states have taken to implement CBE. Very brief accounts are given of the minimal competency-type programs implemented in Sparta, Milwaukee, Stevens Point, and Green Bay. A table lists minimal competency testing activity in the states, and brief accounts are given of minimal competency testing laws and regulations in Arizona, California, Florida, and Nebraska, and in Denver (Colorado) and Greensville County (Virginia). (IRT)

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EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY: THE ISSUE OF COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

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EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY: THE ISSUE OF COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

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EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY: THE ISSUE OF COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

I. INTRODUCTION

A State and National Concern

Over the past decade there has been an increasing concern over the decline in student performance on national standarized tests, as reflected in the annual results of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Since 1963, the SAT scores have headed constantly downward, seemingly indicating that students are not acquiring sufficient background in the basic skill areas (reading, writing and mathematics). The cry to "return to the basics" is something that is being heard throughout the nation.

The decline in student performance is not restricted to high school seniors. Nationwide tests indicate a decline in elementary student and college freshmen performances as well. Former Governor Patrick Lucey, in a November 5, 1976 speech to the Milwaukee Public Schools Administrators and Supervisors Conference, made the following comments about the problem of poor student performance and low test scores:

"College officials confirm the test results as they complain about entering freshmen who sometimes can barely read and write. Last year at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, about 60 percent of the students who hoped to be journalism majors failed an English usage test. This year, the scores improved slightly, with 47 percent failing. A majority of the 3,000 UW-System students given an English placement test last year were unable to answer half the test questions correctly. Other states report similar experiences. In recent years, from 40 to 65 percent of incoming freshmen at the University of California have been required to take remedial English classes because they lack basic composition skills. A survey by the Association of American Publishers indicates that college freshmen are reading at what was formerly considered high school freshman level."

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee recently released the results of tests given to 1977-78 incoming freshmen. About two-thirds of the 1,700 freshmen had scores below the level designated as demonstrating a proficiency in English and mathematics. A recent rule adopted by the College of Letters and Science, will require students to pass a mathematics test in order to graduate and to pass two separate English proficiency examinations in order to advance to junior standing.

Responses to the Problem

One of the major educationally related movements throughout the nation is the demand for greater accountability in the quality of our education and in the performance of our schools. This desire for accountability has resulted in the administering of statewide testing or assessment programs and the adoption of minimal competency testing standards for both high schools and elementary schools. The issue of competency-based education (CBE) is the primary concern of this report. CBE, also referred to as results-oriented or performance-based education, is in part an answer to the public's cry for a "return to the basics" in education.

According to the supporters of minimal competency standards, many students are leaving high school as "functional illiterates" and, as a result, are destroying the credibility of the diploma. Minimal competency testing for high school graduation and grade-to-grade promotion appears to attract the most legislative activity in the various states as a way of approaching the problem.

In response to the declining scores in the Scholastic Aptitude Test, the College Entrance Examination Board that prepares the tests established an advisory commission, headed by former Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz, to examine the causes of the decline. The commission issued its final report in August of this year. A brief summary of the commission's findings can be found in Section II of this report.

In Wisconsin, Chapter 125, Laws of 1971, created a pupil assessment program requiring the state superintendent of public instruction to "develop an educational assessment program to measure objectively the adequacy and efficiency of educational programs offered by public schools in this state... Assessment shall be undertaken at several grade levels on a uniform, statewide basis".

Governor Patrick Lucey, in preparing the 1977 executive budget bill (1977 Senate Bill 77), added a provision calling for an expansion of the sample pupil assessment program to the entire population of 4th, 8th and 12th grade students. If enacted, this program would have made comparative data on student performance available on a statewide basis. This provision was deleted from the original budget bill by the Joint Committee on Finance and, consequently, was not voted on by either house of the Legislature.

Prepared by Gary A. Watchke, Research Analyst.

In addition, Superintendent of Public Instruction Barbara Thompson's Blue Ribbon Commission on Competency Based Education and the 13 State Educational Standards has just recently issued its report supporting the concept of competency-based education, claiming that it "provides for the diagnosis of student learning problems, the provision for developmental educational programs, the required accountability of students and parents, and the opportunity for meaningful involvement of the public in the educational program." Further discussion of the pupil assessment program and the commission's recommendations, as well as a brief look at individual school districts with minimal competency requirements, will be found later in this report.

Types of Tests

There are a number of basic standarized tests that are regularly given to students at differing grade levels. The following is a brief summary of a few of the more popular tests used.

American College Test (ACT), prepared by the American Testing Program, is second only to the Scholastic Aptitude Test as the most widely used college admissions examination in the United States. The exam consists of a series of tests measuring mathematics, English, social studies and natural science skills. According to "Declining Test Scores, A State Study", issued by the Massachusetts Department of Education this year, the national test scores in the areas of English, mathematics and social studies have dropped since 1964-65. Only in the area of natural science have the average scores remained constant or improved slightly. The report contained the following additional comments about the test scores:

> "The composite mean score on all four exams has declined from 20.0 in 1965-66, to 18.7 in 1973-74, a drop of 6.5%. The average scores on the ACT English test have dropped by 7.8% as compared to the decline of 9.2% on the SAT verbal exam. In mathematics, the drop on the ACT has been 5.1% as compared to 6.0% on the SAT. Thus, the rate of score decline on both the ACT and SAT are similar."

Iowa Test of Basic Skills, published by the Houghton Mifflin Company, is a test used to determine how students put into use the basic skills that he or she has acquired in the five subject areas of vocabulary, reading comprehension, language, work-study and arithmetic skills. Tests are available for all grade levels between 3rd and 9th grade. The average scores have declined since the mid-1960's with the most noticeable decline in the grades above 4th.

Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), prepared by the College Entrance Examination Board, is the most widely used college admissions examination in the nation. The 2.5 hour examination consists of mathematical and verbal components. The mathematical portion measures a student's problem-solving abilities in the areas of geometry, elementary algebra and arithmetic reasoning. The verbal portion covers the areas of antonyms, analogies, reading comprehension and sentence completion. According to statistics in the "National Report — College-Bound Seniors, 1975-76," issued by the College Entrance Examination Board, the SAT verbal score averages have declined from 466 in 1966-67 to 431 in 1975-76, and the mathematical score averages have declined from 492 in 1966-67 to 472 in 1975-76.

In an August 26, 1977 press release of the Department of Public Instruction's Publications and Information Services, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Barbara Thompson commented on the Advisory Panel on the Scholastic Aptitude Test Score Decline report which indicated the reasons for the declining test scores on the scholastic aptitude test. The following is an excerpt from the press release:

"Dr. Thompson said that the verbal test scores of Wisconsin high school seniors have followed the general rate of decline in the nation as a whole, but that the math scores of Wisconsin seniors had actually shown an increase since 1968. She also pointed out that on both tests Wisconsin seniors continue to score well above the national average."

II. THE BACKGROUND OF COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

What Is Competency-Based Education?

Competency-based education (CBE) or the requirement that students pass minimal competency tests indicating a certain level of proficiency in order to graduate or be promoted is — in its present application — a relatively new but rapidly spreading movement in the United States. The Blue Ribbon Commission on Competency Based Education and the 13 Educational Standards recommended that the State of Wisconsin recognize the following definition for CBE: "Competency Based Education is an educational program that includes organized learning activities and requires each pupil to master selected learning objectives at specified levels of achievement. These objectives are to be measured periodically." Failure to reach expected levels could result in not receiving a diploma, not advancing to the next grade, or in being required to take remedial work. In other words, students would be required to demonstrate minimum competency in the basic skills.

Although there is no universally accepted level of "minimal competency", it generally requires some competency in such areas as life skills, basic skills, survival skills and the like. The use of proficiency examinations generally take the following forms: (1) early high school graduation, (2) grade-by-grade promotion exams, and (3) high school graduation requirements.

Why the Current Push or Need for Competency-Based Education?

Although the reasons for the great push in competency-based education are numerous, the overriding issue or concern has to be the alarming decline in the academic performance of American schools, especially in the area of basic skills. According to the March 1977 issue of *State Government News*, "Competency requirements are in part an answer to the public's call for a return to basics in education. Employers and colleges are complaining that high school graduates are sorely deficient in basic reading, writing and math skills. The National Assessment of Educational Progress testing program has shown significant numbers of high school graduates nationwide cannot read in any real sense, cannot express themselves in writing, and cannot compute at a functional level."

One of the most recent comprehensive studies made to examine the decline in Scholastic Aptitude Test scores was just completed by the Advisory Panel appointed by the College Entrance Examination Board (which administers the tests) and the Educational Testing Service (which compiles the tests). The panel, chaired by former Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz, issued its final report "On Further Examination" in August 1977 after two years of study.

The Advisory Panel stated that the decline in test scores has occurred in two separate stages or phases, with the first phase covering the period from 1963 to 1970 and the second phase from 1970 to the present. The decline during the first phase is attributed mainly to a dramatically changing composition of the student population taking the tests during that period of time. Some of the specific reasons for the decline during the initial phase include the following:

1. The number of test takers tripled in number with many of them not necessarily continuing on for a 4-year degree.
2. A greater number of low-scoring groups — blacks, other minority groups and women were included among the test takers, tending to lower the test scores.
3. Changes in college entrance policies and an increase in two-year colleges for training with a technical or vocational emphasis.

The commission summarized the first stage decline in the following manner:

"We find, therefore, that the largest part of the SAT score decline between 1963 and about 1970 was identifiable with compositional changes in the mix of the SAT-taking group — considered both in terms of the test takers coming from higher- and lower-scoring groups and in terms of their plans for going to college. Although precise identification of the degree to which these changes explain that part of the decline is impossible, fairly careful calculation indicates that they account for between two-thirds and three-fourths of it."

After 1970, the decline in test scores resulted not so much from a change in the composition of the test-taking group as from other factors in the school and in society as a whole. Although the commission found it more difficult to pinpoint reasons for the drop in student scores during this second phase, it did identify a number of probable causes as follows:

1. Changes in high school courses of study with fewer "basic" courses required and more electives permitted.
2. Changes in learning standards in the schools. Examples would include lower attendance standards, grade inflation coupled with social promotion, and half the homework of previous years.
3. Changes in the family role in the educational process.
4. Television — "by the age 16 most children have spent between 10,000 and 15,000 hours watching television, more time than they spent in school."
5. A number of distracting events which took place, including the war, political assassinations, burning cities and the corruption of our national leadership.
6. A lowering of student motivation for learning and in doing well on SAT exams, since opportunities to get into college have widened greatly.

It is interesting to note that the panel, in its closing remarks, stated "...it is perhaps most significant of all that during the past 10 years the curve of the SAT scores has followed very closely the curve of the entire nation's spirits and self-esteem and sense of purpose."

Problem Areas to be Considered

Although the idea of requiring students to demonstrate basic skills in areas like reading and mathematics before receiving their diplomas appears unassailable in principle, in actuality, the administering of competency examinations can pose some difficult problems. One such problem involves determining what is the proper level of "minimal competency" for the basics. The appropriate level of competency may vary not only from state to state but from school district to school district or even from school to school. If the local districts or schools are allowed to determine their own competency levels, the actual diplomas granted from differing districts may not even be comparable.

Another problem which can arise is how to test minimal competency in certain areas where subjective types of testing are required. For example, it might be much easier and less costly to measure a student's ability to add, subtract or punctuate correctly, than it is to analyze a student's ability to compose proper sentences and paragraphs in a logically consistent manner.

A third major problem concerns the students who do not pass or who fail to qualify for a competency-based diploma. Will failure encourage more school drop outs? Should special diplomas, certificates of attendance, or some other special certificate be granted in lieu of the diploma? It is an important problem that has to be resolved since the diploma does serve as a special passport for additional schooling and job opportunities.

III. WISCONSIN DEVELOPMENTS

The Current Statewide Pupil Assessment Program in Wisconsin

Governor Patrick J. Lucey, in his "1971-73 Budget Message", recommended that educational assessment methods and policies be developed. He continued by stating that "...we must assist school districts, not on the basis of their costs, but on how effectively they use money available to them. We want schools that do a good job with students — which is not necessarily those that are the most costly. Some other states have shown real imagination in assessing quality of instruction; Wisconsin should be among those states."

The above proposal was enacted into law by Chapter 125, Laws of 1971 (Executive Budget), and became Section 115.28 (10) of the Wisconsin Statutes. The new section created a statutory requirement to assess the educational performance of Wisconsin's elementary and secondary schools and directed the state superintendent to:

> "115.28 (10) EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT. Develop an educational assessment program to measure objectively the adequacy and efficiency of educational programs offered by public schools in this state. The program shall include, without limitation because of enumeration, methods by which pupil achievement in fundamental course areas, as set forth in s. 118.01 (1), and other areas of instruction commonly offered by public schools, will be objectively measured each year. Assessment shall be undertaken at several grade levels on a uniform, state-wide basis."

In 1972, State Superintendent Kahl, in response to the above statutory directive, appointed members to an Advisory Task Force on Educational Goals, to which was assigned the task of providing "an educational assessment program to *measure objectively* the adequacy and efficiency of educational programs offered by the public schools in this state". The Superintendent claimed that the adequacy and efficiency of public school programs could not be measured objectively on a statewide basis without first developing a series of goals or objectives against which to measure the programs. The 11 broad goals that were evolved by the task force were to serve as a foundation in the assessment program being developed in the state. The goals were in the following 11 areas: — self-realization; human relations; basic skills; mental and physical health; career education and occupational competence; cultural appreciation; lifelong learning; economic understanding; physical environment and creative, constructive and critical thinking.

Although there were two small pilot testing programs conducted in 1973 and 1975, the first full-scale assessment of students was conducted in May 1976. According to the "Executive Budget Policy Issue Papers" issued by the Department of Administration in January 1977, "A total of about 20,000 students were tested statewide, out of over 200,000 students enrolled in the three grades tested (4th, 8th and 12th), and 928,223 enrolled in public K-12 schools. The cost of the program was $129,800."

The Department of Public Instruction's "Report: 1976 Wisconsin Pupil Assessment Program," issued July 1977, listed the test score results of the random samples of public school students in Wisconsin that participated in the Wisconsin Pupil Assessment Program. The two objectives of the study were to determine how well the students performed in mathematics and how well they compared nationally in mathematics, reading and language. The latter objective was accomplished by the administration of the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, an instrument produced by CTB McGraw-Hill, designed to compare individuals or groups with a national average.

The following is an overview of the findings taken from the above report:

> "1. At all grade levels students generally do best in addition, followed by subtraction and multiplication. The weakest of the four computation domains is division.
>
> "2. Students do best in the use of whole numbers. They show slightly lower scores in decimals, and the poorest scores in the use of fractions.
>
> "3. Generally, twelfth grade students do better than eighth graders on identical items. However, eighth grade students surpass the seniors in addition of decimals and multiplication of fractions.
>
> "4. At all grade levels problem solving or word problems give the students the most difficulty. However, on the identical problems given to eighth and twelfth grade students, the twelfth grade students score higher.
>
> "5. Regional variations in scores are prevalent at the eighth grade level. In contrast, there is little variation in scores at the fourth and twelfth grades.

"6. At all grade levels Wisconsin students perform on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills at or above the national averages in reading, language, and mathematics. Fourth and eighth graders show the strongest results when compared with their peers throughout the country.

"7. National scores in reading, language, and mathematics can be classified into three percentile categories: upper, middle, and lower. A higher percentage of Wisconsin students score in the upper category than the national norm group and a lower percentage score in the lower category than occurs nationally. The score distribution of this representative sample shows Wisconsin in a very favorable light."

Governor Lucey's Proposed Expansion of the Statewide Pupil Assessment Program

Governor Patrick Lucey, in his November 5, 1976, speech to the Milwaukee area educators referred to in the Introduction, also gave his reasons for expanding the existing statewide pupil assessment program. The Governor stated that if we are to curb and reverse the decline in basic skills, "we need conscious policy and program decisions, at the state and local levels, which will lead to competent students, to schools which are doing the job. We need to diagnose what is wrong, where students need help. We need to be able to pinpoint schools and districts with problems. Now in Wisconsin we have a pupil assessment program which does not help us make such a diagnosis. The current program, tests a random sample of students and only allows us to compare Wisconsin pupils with national averages in reading, language and math skills."

1977 Senate Bill 77, the executive budget bill (original bill only) contained Governor Lucey's proposal to expand the testing program to all 4th, 8th and 12th grade students in the state on an annual basis. Governor Lucey had incorporated the expanded pupil assessment program in the original budget bill (SB 77), but it was deleted by the Joint Committee on Finance by a 14-0 vote.

Under the proposal, every student in the three grades would be given an objective-referenced test to measure his or her knowledge in the subject areas being tested — reading, mathematics, science and social studies. In addition, a sample of students would continue to receive a norm-referenced (standardized) test which would indicate how a sample of Wisconsin students are performing in comparison with children throughout the country. The cost of the expanded program was estimated at $285,900 annually, compared to $101,700 for the present program.

Governor Lucey claimed that the cost would be a small price to pay in order to determine if the $1.47 billion now being spent annually to operate Wisconsin's elementary and secondary schools is well spent.

Although the expanded assessment program would permit test results to serve as an accountability measure for a district and would evaluate a school's attainment of its educational goals, critics claim that test results could result in unfair statewide ranking of school districts or individual schools.

Recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Competency Based Education and the 13 State Educational Standards

In 1972 Governor Patrick Lucey established, by Executive Order 29, the Task Force on Educational Financing and Property Tax Reform to reexamine educational financing and property tax reform policies in the state. In its final report, issued in February 1973, the task force listed its recommended minimum educational standards applicable to all school districts in the state. Governor Lucey subsequently adopted those standards along with several previously existing requirements and incorporated the 13 educational standards into his budget bill, which became Chapter 90, Laws of 1973. State Superintendent of Public Instruction Barbara Thompson established the Blue Ribbon Commission and charged it with reviewing the existing 13 educational standards and reviewing competency-based education in the basics of mathematics, reading and writing.

The second charge to the commission, concerning competency-based education, was assigned to the Subcommittee on Competency Based Education and represents the primary concern of this report. Superintendent Thompson, in making the charge to the commission, further stated that "We might look at competency based education as an 'educational program that enables all pupils to master selected skills at a specified level of attainment.' In a CBE program, competencies or goals are used as the basis for awarding credit, gauging and noting the progress of each individual student's school based achievements from kindergarten to high school graduation. For too long we have based our educational requirement measurements on credits and attendance. It is time to add the third dimention to make a more balanced set of measurements."

The commission, via its Subcommittee on Competency Based Education, has developed the following three alternative models for CBE for the State of Wisconsin in reading, writing and mathe.natics.

MODEL 1 — "LOCAL DEVELOPMENT AND LOCAL DETERMINATION"

The first model prepared by the commission represents its primary recommendation.

1. Each local school district is responsible for developing its own CBE program in three basic subject areas. The Department of Public Instruction may, at a school district's request, assist in the development of testing materials and the like. The Wisconsin Legislature is urged to provide the Department of Public Instruction with the necessary moneys to fulfill this function.
2. The school district should enthusiastically encourage the participation of the general public, parents, the board of education, the staff and student body in the development of its program.
3. School districts are also urged to recognize the needs of the gifted and talented students, as well as the slow learners, in developing their programs.
4. The goals and objectives of the local district's program should be publicized widely prior to implementing the program.
5. Evaluative tests should be administered for students who are not measuring up to the set standards.
6. Remedial programs should be established for students who are not measuring up to the set standards.
7. The local school districts retain the responsibility for setting the minimal competency levels, as well as determining the policy regarding promotions and graduation.
8. In-service training for teachers should be provided by the local school districts.

Model 2 — "Group Development and Local Determination"

The various programs outlined in Model 1 should be developed by a consortium of schools or by a combined group of school districts at the CESA level. Local school districts could be granted authority to make certain limited changes in the programs.

Model 3 — "Research and Experimentation"

The Department of Public Instruction should study the results of other CBE programs through 1980, before any moves are made for statewide implementation of a CBE program.

Wisconsin Schools With Minimal Competency Type Programs

Sparta

In 1976, the Sparta school system formally adopted a math proficiency test to be administered to all 11th grade students during their first semester. To pass the examination and to receive a diploma a student must answer 33 out of 70 questions.

In addition, Sparta is developing competency tests in four other areas: reading, writing, physical fitness, and behavior and citizenship.

Sparta officials allow the competency examination standards to be waived for special education students if so advised by the appropriate school personnel.

Milwaukee

In April 1977, the Milwaukee School Board voted to require all 1978 graduates of Milwaukee public schools to pass an eighth grade reading test to get their high school diploma. Although the program was opposed by the school administration, it passed the school board by a unanimous vote.

In addition, the school board voted to require school administrators to develop a plan for informing parents where their children stand in reading and a program for giving poor readers extra assistance.

Stevens Point

Under a recently approved program, all graduating high school students (excluding the current junior and senior classes) will be required to pass a competency test in the areas of math, language arts, civics and writing. The sophomore class of 1977-78, and all subsequent sophomore classes, will be taking the tests during its sophomore year. Students who fail a test will be given the opportunity to remedy their weak area and retake it at a later date.

Green Bay

All Green Bay school district students who wish to graduate will be required to pass competency tests in language arts and mathematics. The new tests became part of the school curriculum this year (1977-78).

During the first year in operation, 9th, 10th and 11th grade students will be required to take the math examination unless the student has accumulated 2 credits in math with a C or better average. After this school year, the test will be administered to 9th grade students only.

Language arts examinations are to be given to all 10th and 11th grade students during this initial year. After this year, the test will be administered to 10th grade students with only a few exceptions.

Students who fail to pass the competency tests will have to take remedial courses in basic communication and mathematical skills in order to graduate.

According to an article in the August 1977 issue of *Wisconsin School News*, the locally developed tests measure a student's ability to solve everyday problems of adult life. A few examples to illustrate are as follows:

"This test asks you to do practical things and answer practical questions," begin the directions on the language arts test. "Read the directions carefully. Make sure that you understand them."

"Students then take a vocabulary test, show they know correct form for a business letter, and prove they can understand the label on a medicine bottle. They interpret the washing instructions that come on a shirt, show they know how to use a classified ad index, and prove they can write a paragraph properly.

"The mathematics test is equally practical. Students must show mastery of basic skills from addition to division. They have to interpret graphs, work out problems on clothing costs, and figure the distances between cities on a map."

IV. ACTION IN THE OTHER STATES

The issue of minimal competency tests has attracted considerable attention in numerous states throughout the nation. According to an Education Commission of the States' report, 10 states have enacted legislation and 16 state boards of education have adopted rulings providing for some type of minimal competency testing. The report identifies the following states which have adopted such competency provisions, as well as those states which have introduced similar legislation during 1977.

Table: A LISTING OF STATE MINIMAL COMPETENCY TESTING ACTIVITY*

Legislation Enacted 1975–76	State Bd. of Education Rulings 1975–76	Legislation Pending and Failed 1977
1. California	1. Arizona	1. Alabama
2. Colorado	2. Georgia	2. Arizona
3. Florida	3. Delaware	3. Arkansas
4. Maryland	4. Michigan	4. California
5. New Jersey	5. Missouri	5. Florida
6. Virginia	6. Nebraska	6. Illinois
7. Washington	7. New York	7. Iowa
8. Louisiana	8. Oregon (1972)	8. Kansas
	9. Vermont	9. Louisiana
	10. Rhode Island	10. Maine
		11. Massachusetts
		12. Minnesota
		13. Nevada
		14. New Hampshire
		15. North Carolina
1977	1977	16. Ohio
		17. Pennsylvania
1. Maryland	1. Idaho	18. South Carolina
2. Nevada	2. Kentucky	19. Tennessee
	3. Maryland	20. Texas
	4. New Hampshire	21. Washington
	5. New Mexico	22. Mississippi
	6. Oklahoma	23. North Dakota

*Since June 11, 1977, Maine and North Carolina have enacted minimal competency legislation.
Source: Education Commission of the States, "Update VI: Minimal Competency Testing", June 1, 1977.

State Approaches to Minimal Competency Testing

The following summary of state activity in the area of minimal competency testing was extracted from an article written by Mr. Chris Pipho, Associate Director for the Education Commission of the

States' Department of Research and Information. The summary is only a part of Mr. Pipho's article on state approaches to minimal competency testing that will appear in the National Education Association publication, *Today's Education*, this fall (Mr. Pipho granted us permission to quote from the unpublished manuscript).

> "Among the 24 states that have taken official action in this area, the most agreement seems to be in the area of the identification of basic skill areas needing emphasis. Reading is specifically mentioned in all but two of the states (Louisiana and New Hampshire); mathematics appears to be left out only by Maryland while communication skills are not mentioned in Michigan, Missouri, Maryland and New Jersey. Life skills come in for mention in Florida and survival skills surface in Rhode Island. Colorado leaves the whole area of identification of basic skills to the local districts while California and Florida allow local districts to add subject areas at their discretion.
>
> "Only two states, Florida and California, have enacted legislation which would permit early exit from high school. Technically, however, only California has implemented the program; Florida's use of the General Educational Development (GED) test will begin in the fall of 1977. While one or two states mention the 'early exit' concept in 1977 legislation, no additional states have enacted legislation or passed state board rulings which would implement such a program.
>
> "Thirteen out of the 24 states have minimal competency testing standards that will affect high school graduation. These states are: Arizona, California, Colorado (local option), Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Idaho, Maryland, Nevada, New York, New Mexico, Oregon and Vermont.
>
> "Grade promotion appears to be a requirement in only three states: Arizona, 8th grade; Maryland, grades 2-12 in reading; in Florida, legislation is calling for all grades but in effect it will probably be tied to promotions at 3, 5, 8 and 11th grade.
>
> "The identification of students needing remedial assistance appears to be a very common element in much of the state-mandated action. Nineteen of the 24 states make direct mention or implication of this concept. These states are: California, Colorado, Idaho, Louisiana, Maryland, Missouri, Oregon, Michigan, Nebraska, New York, New Jersey, New Mexico, New Hampshire, Nevada, Rhode Island, Oklahoma, Virginia, Vermont and Washington. In Maryland, it appears that districts have an option of either providing remedial assistance or holding students back. In Rhode Island, the identification of deficiencies appears to be aimed more at the statewide goals for education, presumably on the assumption that these would be used by local districts in assisting the individual students. The New Hampshire references are similar to Rhode Island in that they are directed more to the local school districts than to the individual students, apparently assuming again that districts will be working for the benefit of individual students."

Minimal Competency Testing Laws or Rules in Selected States and Local Districts

To obtain a general overall picture of the minimal competency testing provisions in existence, we are listing a few program highlights from a small number of states and local districts that have adopted such a program via legislative enactment or administrative ruling. The Education Commission of States' publication, "Update VI: Minimal Competency Testing", mentioned in the foregoing table in this report, was the source for much of the following summary data.

ARIZONA

The Arizona Department of Education adopted a rule, effective January 1, 1976, specifying that all school districts must require eighth grade graduates to be able to read, write and compute at the sixth grade level. High school graduate students must demonstrate an ability in the same subject area at the ninth grade level.

CALIFORNIA

(Chapter 1265, Laws of 1972; Chapter 371, Laws of 1975;
Chapters 315, 473 and 876, Laws of 1976; and Chapter 894, Laws of 1977)

1. All school districts are required to establish their own standards of proficiency in the subject areas of reading, writing and computation. The law provides that students should be tested at least four times between the 4th and 12th grades unless they reach the required achievement level earlier. Parent-teacher conferences and remedial classes are to be established for the students needing such work. No student is to receive a high school diploma after June 1968 unless he or she passes the proficiency test.

2. The California High School Proficiency Test, covering the basic skill areas, permits persons 16 years of age and over who successfully complete the test to obtain a proficiency certificate which is *legally equivalent* to a diploma. The person taking the early exit exam must have at least a sophomore standing. Students who pass the test at that particular young age may then leave school providing they have parental consent.

3. The California State Board of Education is required to prepare, publish and distribute examples of and information relating to the criteria used in establishing the minimal competency standards in the basic skill areas for the proficiency test.

A New York Times article (October 2, 1977) reported on the problems facing California school boards in implementing the new law. The school boards are struggling with the problem of setting standards. "There is no consensus on the level of skills that students should be expected to attain." The law is accused of being vague and ambiguous.

FLORIDA

Chapter 223, Laws of 1976, the "Educational Accountability Act of 1976," provides for accountability, planning by the State Board of Education and local districts, equivalency examinations, subject area examinations and grade-to-grade promotion requirements.

Statute Section 229.55 (2) (f), states that one of the major intentions of the act is to "Provide information to the public about the performance of the Florida system of public education in meeting established goals and providing effective, meaningful, and relevant educational experiences designed to give students at least the minimum skills necessary to function and survive in today's society."

Included among the many provisions of the law are the following:

1. The statewide assessment program was amended to require that students in grades 3, 5, 8 and 11 be tested for basic skills in order to identify their needs and to assess how well the various schools are meeting the minimum standards.

2. By July 1, 1977, each school district board was required to establish a program for pupil progression based on an evaluation of each student's performance, including how well the student masters the mimimum skills approved by the state board. The programs established are to be based on local goals and objectives with particular emphasis placed on performance in basic skills (especially, reading) before the student is promoted from 3rd, 5th, 8th or 11th grade.

3. By the 1978-79 school year, each school district board must establish standards for graduation from its secondary schools. Included among the standards are 1) mastery of basic skills, 2) satisfactory performance in functional literacy as determined by the State Board of Education and 3) completion of the minimum number of credits required by the district school board.

4. Each district is to provide procedures to help students found unable to meet the set standards to improve their skills. Each district is to provide for the awarding of certificates of attendance and may provide for differentiated diplomas corresponding with a student's level of competency.

According to the Education Commission of the States' publication on minimal competency testing cited earlier, implementation of the above statutory provisions, by the Florida Department of Education, has taken a number of different directions. A brief look at the department's implementation efforts follows:

> "1. *Early Exit from High School* — This program using the General Educational Development (GED) tests will go into use in school districts during the fall of 1977. The Florida Department of Education is using the GED test battery under a special arrangement with the American Council on Education.
>
> "2. *Subject Area Examinations* — This program will go into use in the fall of 1977, using a mixture of commercially developed and local district prepared tests. Students, depending on local district rules, will be able to test out of or around certain courses.
>
> "3. *Grade-to-Grade Promotion* — The statewide basic skills test administered at grades 3, 5, 8 and 11 will serve as a screening device controlling passage to the next grade level.
>
> "4. *High School Graduation* — For those students choosing to graduate with a regular high school diploma. They must pass the functional literacy examination. This test was developed under contract by the Educational Testing Service and was pre-tested in five counties in March of 1977. Prior to graduation, 11th graders must also pass the basic skills assessment test or receive special district dispension."

NEBRASKA

In 1975 the Nebraska Department of Education initiated a program requiring local school districts to establish minimum performance standards in the subjects of writing, mathematics and reading. Testing of the students began at the 5th grade level.

The department has also developed the Nebraska Battery of Essential Learning Skills for use by any school district in the state. Those districts which do use the test are required to use it regularly for at least a two-year period so that students needing remedial help can be identified. The test is not to be used to either pass or fail a student.

New York

The New York Board of Regents has recently adopted a program requiring students to pass a basic competency test in reading and mathematics as a prerequisite for obtaining a diploma. A few highlights of the program, extracted from the Education Commission of the States' publication on minimal competency testing, are as follows:

> "The board of regents, on May 26, 1976, approved a resolution establishing the passing of basic competency tests in reading and mathematics as a requirement for issuance of a high school diploma, beginning with the graduating class of June 1979. These basic competency tests are criterion-referenced tests designed to measure basic adult skills necessary to function in an adult society. They were pilot tested in 1975 and used on a regular basis in the 1976-77 school year. The tests are first given in the ninth grade and provide a basis for remediation prior to high school graduation. Currently the minimum competency cut-off point is defined as 65% of all items correct on both the mathematics and reading test.
>
> "The board of regents has given approval for incorporating three additional tests into the graduation requirements effective in June 1980. The three additional tests would be in the areas of 1) civics and citizenship, 2) practical science, health and drug education, and 3) writing and language skills.
>
> "The New York State Department of Education also administers the Regents Diploma Program and the Pupil Evaluation Program (PEP), both of which are related to evaluating student performance in the basic skill areas."

We might also note that the State of New York also has regents' examinations, which are end-of-course or comprehensive achievement tests designed to measure the achievement of those pupils of average and above average ability who had instruction based on State courses of study. They are, consequently, not appropriate measures of the achievement of all secondary students.

Denver, Colorado

The Denver public school system is a pioneer in the establishment of minimum competency requirements. Since 1961, Denver public school students have been required to pass a basic skills test before being awarded a diploma. According to an article in the March 1977 issue of *State Government News*, the Denver school system "places greater emphasis on teaching of basic skills in elementary school and the availability of remedial services at the secondary level. Students take the skills test in the ninth grade, with about 35 percent passing on this first try and 20 percent failing. Students who fail parts of the exam are retested on only the part they fail. By the end of the twelfth grade, only about 1.5 percent fail to pass all of the exam." The skills tested under the Denver program include the following: spelling, reading, arithmetic, and language. Certificates of attendance are given to students who fail to pass the minimum requirements or do not have the required number of credits provided they have established a satisfactory attendance record. The Denver system apparently also maintains a course credit requirement for graduation.

Greensville County, Virginia

According to TIME magazine (September 26, 1977), the Greensville County school system initiated a minimal competency program in the fall of 1973. Students are required to take a standarized test twice a year to determine whether they have mastered the skills set for their grade level. Among the major features of the program, as mentioned in the article, are the following:

1. Students who are retained because of low achievement do not remain in their old classrooms. Instead, they are placed in new rooms with new teachers and given remedial lessons with other students of approximately the same age.
2. A "partial promotion" system is also provided whereby a student who has partially mastered fourth grade, for example, may be half-promoted to a grade called 4-5.
3. Students who do not or cannot earn a high school diploma may opt for a four-year Occupational Proficiency Training course, provided that they are 14 years of age, are at least two years behind in achievement and have written consent from their parents. These students are specially trained in some vocational endeavor and, upon graduation, receive a certificate detailing their job-related skills.

The results of the program in reducing the number of students held back has dropped significantly. In addition, the overall achievement averages of the students have jumped from the 30th percentile to the 50th percentile on national tests. Furthermore, the school dropout rate has also declined dramatically since the program was instituted.

Although most of the comments concerning the program have been positive, a grievance has been filed in the form of a petition by the N.AA.C.P, at the request of a number of black families, asking the Department of Health, Educational and Welfare to examine the Greensville program. "Among the N.AA.C.P. worries: that testing and promotion policies have resulted in the 'resegregation of the classrooms in entire school system', in an increase in the dropout and hold-back rates of black students and a decrease in the number of blacks enrolled in college preparatory courses."

V. FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITY

Although most of the action in the area of minimal competency testing is found at the state and local levels, two bills, relating to the establishment of proficiency standards for secondary school students have been introduced in the United States House of Representatives. The two identical bills, H.R. 6088, introduced by Representative Mottl, and H.R. 7116, introduced by Representative Mottl and 7 other representatives, require state educational agencies to establish a program of proficiency standards for high school graduates before receiving any funds under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

The bills include the following provisions:

1. The standards must include the administration of a reading, writing and mathematics proficiency examination to all students enrolled in the secondary schools.

2. The examination shall be administered to each student in the academic year preceding his or her year of graduation.

3. If a student fails to pass a grade, the state must give the student an opportunity to retake the exam in the following year.

4. Every student must receive a passing grade on the exam in order to graduate.

5. A National Commission of Basic Education is created for the purpose of administering the program. The commission's duties include the establishment of basic standards of educational proficiency in the subject areas mentioned above and the reviewing and approving of various state educational agency plans.

A hearing on H.R. 6088 was conducted on September 13 and 14, 1977 before the Committee on Education and Labor Committee's Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary and Vocational Education.

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